

by SpartanPrime101

Summary: On August 1st, 2551, the Covenant launch a full-scale invasion on the human colony of Gracemaria. With most of the UNSC elsewhere in the galaxy, the fate of the capital New Sparta is in the hands of the soldiers and machines of the 303rd Sparta 'Hoplite' Battle Corp...and their new Spartan IV super soldiers.

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**_Halo: Gracemaria_**
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****What's up world!? This is SpartanPrime101, bringing to you the first installment of my Halo fanfiction story: Halo Gracemaria. Just to let you know, this is one of my first fanfiction stories ever, so if any of you have any sort of disagreement with how and what I write, please read and review. As well, if you find any evidence of plagiarism, I apologize ahead of time and promise to change this as soon as possible. And so, without further adieu, here is the first chapter of Halo Gracemaria.****

Just for the record, this installment is based on the first chapter of **_Air Battle Force_**** by Dale Brown, which inspired and provided me with the information to describe the air battle in this chapter. I also included some Bleach references throughout the chapter.**

I do not own Halo, Bleach or Air Battle Force; they belong to their respectful creators/authors.

[illegible]

"Talking"

__"Radio"__

'Thinking' _

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[**_Chapter 1: The Ambush_**]

**Continent of Southern Ionia, Gracemaria, Sigma Leo
System**

32**nd**** S Highway, Eastern Badlands, Iskandar Province, 126kms
Northeast of the Plains of New Marathon**

November 28**th****, 2550: 17:28 **

Colonel Gustav 'Aizen' Zhelberg watched from his command vehicle as his youngest " and least experienced " insurrectionist fighters moved along the sand dune towards the roadway below them. Their task was to scout out the best positions for the ambush. There was little time before the UNSC convoy would arrive. The rag tag group of militia insurgents would have to be prepared if they were to ensure the element of surprise.

Both truly believed that, should they succeed, their actions would earn them praise from their ancestral forefathers of old. To Aizen, they were merely little more than extra baggage that could be easily replaced.

'_They actually believe in that old superstition_', he thought to himself. '_Of course, one must follow a strong Sheppard in order to attain a sense of purpose_.'

Of course, Aizen himself was not unfamiliar with their youthful enthusiasm; on the contrary, it was this psychological emotion that he relied upon to strengthen his image throughout the Insurrection movement across Gracemaria: Ever since his fallout from the South Ionian Military Branch five years earlier, Aizen had become a significant player in the rise of the Gracemaria insurgent movement.

Like his 20th Century idol _Adolf Hitler_, he began playing with the increasing distrust and frustration among the isolated communities concerning the UNSC's military grasp on colonial trade and resupply; by the late 2540's, many of the outer colonies " what few remained unscathed by this so called Covenant - were suffering from poor medical treatment, restricted education, and new conscription policies for the United Nations Marine Corps (UNMC) and Orbital Drop Shock Troopers (ODST) Corps.

As a result, he had gained a fierce " and murderous " reputation among the local misfits and 'undesirables'. Of course, most of these were religious radicals, often associated with fascist and communist communities throughout the provinces. By 2546, the _Gracemaria Reformation Movement_ (GRM) consisted of nearly 179,000 active members throughout the two main continents of the planet.

However, this had taken a startling turn in the summer of 2547: During a raid against a UNMC barracks on the outskirts of New Sparta in North Ionia, a small fraction of insurgents " including Aizen's third in command, Tier Harribel " had become separated and were being pursued by a rival insurgent militia. During the engagement, they had encountered a young Marine of the New Sparta Military

Defence Corps.

Apparently, despite their conflicting ideologies, the Marine had risked his own life to assist Harribel and her people â€" ignoring repeated orders from ONI to arrest them for trial and interrogation for terrorism. Incredibly, the Marine's actions â€" and his attitude towards Harribel not as an insurgent, but as a person â€" were enough to turn her against Aizen and his religious cult. Ironically, Harribel herself did not believe in senseless bloodshed; she preferred to carry out more 'honorable' tactics to gain popularity, rather than armed violence and destruction.

While ONI was more than slightly infuriated with the Marine's actions, the United Republic of Gracemaria government was willing to allow Harribel and her team some leeway; their military expertise and tactical knowledge of the insurrection movements were some of the 'official' key factors behind this decision.

At first, Aizen couldn't help but feel amused by the actions of his former Terceira (Third in Command). In spite of years of influence, she had willfully denounced his hold upon her â€" as well as those under her command â€" for the sake of the young Marine and his acts of selflessness. One could describe this outcome as ludicrous and near-impossible to achieve.

However, the events that followed this act of desertion were not to hold any sense of amusement for Aizen or his ambitions: In exchange for the freedom of herself and her people, Harribel had agreed to surrender the locations of several caches of commandeered equipment and weaponry essential for the GRM movement â€" approximately 30% of their entire stockade of vehicles and supplies had been confiscated by the spring of 2548. In spite of these losses, the GRM was still well prepared for any future actions by the Gracemarian military in the new decade.

Anything, that is, except the discovery â€" and excavation â€" of several Forerunner infrastructures throughout the Northern Ionian landscape.

While his intelligence concerning these unknown entities was negligible, he was well aware of the short-term â€" and long-term â€" affects this would have for Gracemaria's economic and political stability. Subsequently, the URG had also begun lending support to the growing Gracemarian Independence Militia (GIM), which had agreed to a ceasefire so as to strengthen the new Forerunner technology industry. This included the utilization of the new Forerunner energy material, referred to as Forerunium-U throughout the Colonial Archaeological Community (CAC).

Consequently, as popularity for the UNSC-GIM Military/Economic Alliance skyrocketed throughout North and South Ionia, armed funding for Aizen and the GRM began to plummet. By early July, 2550 â€" just two years after the first excavation operations of the Forerunner structures began - the GRM had lost financial and armament support from some of their strongest industrial allies. With their main stockpiles of arms and supplies dwindling, Aizen's once well-structured Syndicate had become a shadow of what it was during the 2540's. As such, the need to achieve self-sufficient technological development capabilities had become essential for the GRM's continued existence.

This was exactly why they were here in the first place: According to his accomplice within Office of Naval Intelligence, an important military convoy was to travel along this highway on route to the _Butch O'Hare II Military Airbase_, on the outskirts of the New Athens Spaceport. Officially, the convoy was transporting a top priority cargo for scientific study at the South Ionian University of Research and Development. Unofficially, this cargo consisted of the Forerunium-U material now being installed into the new vehicles and warships of the Gracemaria Colonial Navy. If he could attain the unknown material for himself, Aizen could renew his ambitions for socialist political reform within the South Ionian government.

His train of thought was interrupted by a sudden flash of light, followed by a small explosion. The cause for this was easily deduced: One of the scouts, in his hurry to reach the roadway, had become careless, and stepped on a nearby IED, most likely from an earlier roadside assault; the poor fool was dead before his body hit the ground.

_ 'No matter;_ _there are always extra recruits_', He mused.

Despite this setback, his people were able to position themselves along the roadside; they would be well hidden from anyone traveling along the highway. They had utilized this style of guerrilla warfare before, and "as of yet" had often emerged relatively unscathed. They were confident, tenacious...

And desperate; after nearly four months of rationalizing their supplies and on the run from constant UNSC aerial assaults, Aizen's band of rebels was, literary, on its last legs.

Either they succeeded in this raid, or they would perish.

The air was thick with anticipation as the insurgents waited for the convoy to approach; the highway ditch and hillside were silent save for the hushed, ragged breathing of the bone-weary rebels.

Soon they could hear the rumble of revved engines approaching the ambush point; the source appeared over the hillside moments later: The first vehicle "a standard M12-LRV Warthog" led the convoy down the highway, followed by an M12G1 Gausshog "the Anti-Armor version of the M12. The rear defence was composed of a second M12 Gausshog and M12-Warthog, respectively. Through his binoculars, Aizen could clearly see the facial expressions of the Marines onboard: they were relaxed, confident that this would mission would turn out to be yet another routine delivery service.

_ 'Pitiful, arrogant fools' _Aizen mused. ' _They truly believe that their recent victories have made them the rulers of this province'.

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He focused his attention upon the vehicle at the centre of the convoy - and the rebels' intended target: a Mobile Command Vehicle (MCV) Wolverine, a type-48 Radio dish in place of its duel Rocket Pod Turret. This would enable the convoy infantry to maintain radio contact with any possible air support provided by the Gracemaria Military Defence Corps.

Aizen hoped, for the sake of himself and his group, that his ONI

informant had eliminated this option for the Marines defending the package. If not, this assault would be over before it even began.

As the convoy neared their positions, the rebels grew evermore impatient, their trigger fingers twitching as they readied to launch the assault: The rebels were armed with light automatic weapons (primarily SMG's and outdated MA5B Assault Rifles), some fragmentation grenades, and four SR-48 rocket launchers (each with two rounds per launcher). They had also attained six Mongoose ATVs, five standard M12 Warthogs, two M12-R7 Rockethogs, and two non-militarized Warthog troop carriers â€" one of which served as Aizen's command vehicle (CV). These munitions would barely provide adequate support during a light skirmish; their weapons would prove worthless during an all out brawl against heavily armed Marines. If they engaged too soon, their position would be revealed and the Marines would riddle them with their M41 Chain guns and M68 ALIM Gauss Cannon turrets.

The rebels waited for the lead M12 to pass before they initiated their assault: The remaining scout fired a rocket at the Gausshog just ahead of the MCV, where it detonated in front of the driver's position; the hog exploded into a raging fireball, tumbling off the road and into the ditch. The next targets were the rear Gausshog and Warthog, both which succumbed to rocket fire and grenades. Some of the grenades landed under the MCV, detonating in a splendid display of fire and sound. With the forward and rear vehicles eliminated, had it not suffered damage from the exploding grenades, the MCV was effectively boxed in from both sides, unable to retreat or advance.

The rebels, emboldened by their success, rose up from their concealed positions and pressed their attack, their medium firearms spraying bullets at the remaining vehicles in the convoy.

As his warriors pressed their assault â€" the resulting carnage much more than even he had imagined, given their limited resources â€" Aizen disembarked from his CV, approached the Wolverine, its tracks blown by anti-tank grenades. Thankfully, the cockpit and cargo hold had remained unscathed during the firefight, along with â€" hopefully â€" the special cargo.

'This is almost too easy,' Aizen frowned. 'Actually, this is far too easy.'

Aizen noted on the reaction from the Marines within the cockpit in the Wolverine as he approached.

Actually, more specifically, it was their lack of reaction that irked his curiosity.

Upon recollection, some military personal had attempted to negotiate with Aizen during their past encounters. However, these Marines in particular had apparently decided to merely remain indifferent to their current situation. So it was understandable why the most logical motion to Aizen was to simply terminate them, claim his prize, and depart before reinforcements arrived.

Instead, Aizen continued to the driver's side of the MCV and, against his better judgment, pulled on the handle, revealing the interior of the vehicle. Inside, he analyzed the standard design and fabrication

of the dashboard and steering mechanism... as well as the two Marine escorts that had piloted the behemoth.

Both of which hummed and flickered to the rhythm of the holographic projector just above the steering column.

And nestled between the holograms was what appeared to be a metal briefcase, with the inscription logo of the CAC on the side. His thoughts lingering on the holograms, Aizen reached through the driver's image and retrieved the case. Placing the case before him, he hesitantly unlocked the lid and opened the case...

To reveal a small screen and keyboard on the bottom, displaying a laughing red skull and crossbones, and flashing underneath were the words: YOU'VE BEEN CONNED, MATEYS!

The realization hit Aizen like a sledgehammer: This entire operation had been staged " from the very moment he had received information about the convoy and its cargo " in order to draw him and his followers into the open. All along the battle zone, his fellow fighters were announcing their disbelief concerning the holographic Marines and their phantom carriages.

Two separate thoughts passed through Aizen's mind: The only reason why these vehicles would have holographic crewmen was that they didn't require manual assistance: These were most likely Unmanned Combat Military Vehicles, similar to those first developed during the 21st Century, and the new Hammerhead UCAV's used by the UNSC Marines and Rangers.

However, most UCMV's were equipped with short-range computerized control, from support vehicles positioned just outside the maximum combat range. And the nearest military faculty capable of providing enough juice to maintain radio communication with these vehicles was at the New Sparta Thermopylae Army Base " approximately 940 miles to the North-West. This meant that the only possible explanation for this phenomenon would be...

...would be...

Air support!_

Aizen's blood turned cold with dread at the full deduction of his blunder. Of course there would be air support for such an important cargo; no veteran military commander would send an armored convoy into hostile territory without providing aerial cover for their ground troops.

Aizen turned to his followers, many whom had begun to gather into small groups along the roadside.

"IT'S A TRAP! ALL OF YOU GET AWAY FROM THE ROAD!"

The sound of his CV Warthog exploding told him that it was already too late.

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25,000 ft., Iskandar Province

****November 28****th****, 2550: 18:12****

Nearly one hundred miles away, soaring at twenty-five thousand feet, a lone HSB-79 Thunderbird strike aircraft of the 11th Fighter-Bomber Air Wing orbited over the rolling dunes of Iskandar Province. The heavy stealth bomber had been on station ever since the convoy had departed for the New Marathon spaceport that afternoon. Now, after having confirmed the arrival of the insurrectionist Colonel Aizen, its crew were given the green light to engage.

General Daniel 'Talon' McClampton studied the high-digital video display on the large, super-monitor before him as the medium-range AIM-290 Seeker Missile launched from the Bombers internal weapon's bay turned the rebels CV into a blazing inferno.

"Good kill, sir; target one is toast", his co-pilot, Brigadier General Sarah 'Eagle' Hopkins reported from her seat to the right of Daniel. "Tangos splitting into groups, with priority target moving South-west, away from the convoy. It looks like they're trying to duck behind the sand dunes."

"Well they won't get far", Daniel grinned deviously. "Target the remaining enemy Warthogs and ATV's and scan for possible air support. We don't want them to get a chance to call in reinforcements."

"Copy that sir," Sarah replied. "Targeting enemy vehicles; let's nail these Bastards!"

As she gained target lock on the rebel vehicles, Daniel looked back to the monitor before him. Several images were displayed across the wide screen, including the Thunderbirds altitude and speed, their firing range from the rebel's down on the rolling landscape below them...

And the full image of their priority target - Colonel Gustav 'Aizen' Zhelberg - attempting to flee the warzone.

For both pilots, this mission â€" Operation Just Cause â€" was a chance for them to exact revenge for the losses inflicted by Aizen's terror campaign. This included the death of one of their closest comrades: Nearly three months ago this day, Aizen's band of insurgents had launched a daring raid on the New Sparta 243rd Aerial Coast Guard Unit, attempting to acquire some of the base's new Ground-Orbital Communications technology to sell on the dwindling Gracemarian Black Market.

When the 11th FBAW had arrived to provide air support for the beleaguered Marines and Colonial Guardsmen on the ground, they were jumped by a flight of rebel piloted Model-IV UH-144 Falcon gunships â€" gunships, of all things â€" that had approached the air field under the UNSC's radar detection net.

During the following engagement, Sarah's wingman, Flight Officer Randy 'Phantom' Macdonald, was shot down by an SA-96 air-to-air missile from one of the gunships, while he was providing escort for a Pelican loaded with wounded Marines and ground crew. He and his co-pilot were later found dead just outside the airfields defensive perimeter; apparently, they had been shot by a rebel sniper while descending in their parachutes.

While the rebels were driven off, this did little to comfort Randy's family back home on Reach " and his six year old daughter.

One way or another, Aizen would pay. Not just for what happened to Randy and his family; but for the thousands of lives needlessly sacrificed in his quest for power on Gracemaria.

The monitor started pinging loudly, signaling that the Thunderbird's auto-targeting system was locked onto the rebel vehicles down below.

"Targets acquired: we've got solid tone on the Seekers," Sarah called out.

Daniel nodded. "Copy that. Confirm target lock."

"Confirmed, targets locked. We've got them, sir." Sarah squirmed excitedly.

He shared her anticipation. "Firing Seekers," he called, as his finger closed on the release trigger.

Both watched the monitor as the AIM-290 Seeker Missiles dropped from the plane's belly, their rocket packs igniting once they had cleared the internal compartment. The missiles then sped away at nearly Mach 4.6; their smoke trails were the only sign that they had even been fired.

Barely five seconds after they were launched, both pilots watched as several bright explosions erupted among the rebel convoy; to Daniel and Sarah, it actually appeared as quite the spectacle against the darkening sky above.

"Hooah, we got them! Look at those Bastards run," Sarah cheered. "Chew on that, you bloody cowards!"

Daniel laughed. "All right, Sarah; time to wrap this up and head on home: Contact Falcon flight and let them know the pathway is clear."

"Yes sir!" Sarah responded, opening a channel to the heavies down on the deck. "Channel open, security code Alpha-dash-one-nine-nine-seven! Reaper-1 to Falcon lead, do you copy, over?"

There was a brief pause over the comm. channel before, "This is Falcon lead to Reaper-1; we read y'all loud an' clear. How's the siph' seeing up there?"

"Falcon lead, this is Reaper-1. The target's pants are down and the shit's flying. You're clear to give those bastards the ass-whoopin' of their lives! Targets are marked and waiting to be smoked!"

"Rodger that, weapon's armed and ready. Hope y'all had your fun, cause th' heat's comin' down hard!"

Sarah allowed a devilish smirk to cross her face as she added, "And tell Michael to suit up; we wouldn't want Aizen to get bored down

there, now would we?"

She could imagine the Irish Marine's amused smirk as he answered,
"Yes ma'am!"

Before the radio link was cut, Sarah could hear the distinctive thud of hard rock music in the background, as well as lyrics from an old 21st Century Swedish song:

(Sabaton Coat of Arms Track 7: Saboteurs)

"Called in to serve, and they knew what to do"

"They were the heroes of the cold, Warrior Soul-"

Daniel looked over to his co-pilot, whose smirk covered the entire lower half of her face.

"I take it that the package is ready for deployment."

Sarah tried "and failed" to keep her voice level as she replied, "Let's just say, at the rate this mission's been going, he has concerns of suffering from boredom before it was all over."

Daniel snorted, shaking his head at the thought of one of his Spartans complaining about boredom.

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The same emotions couldn't be expressed by the insurgents on the ground: among the first casualties were the two Rockethogs, both transformed into raging infernos by the AIM-290's Sabot tipped warheads. During the confusion, one of the ATV's had drifted too close to the M12-R7's in its haste to escape the Grim Reaper circling above; it too fell victim to the ensuing explosion that sealed the Rockethogs' demise.

And these were only the first to succumb to the withering fire raining down upon them. Four M12's and three more ATV's were reduced to scrap metal by the remaining AIM-290's. Miraculously, either by the skill of the driver or by sheer luck, the remaining M12 Warthog managed to remain relatively unscathed, though its crew were now desperately trying to flip the vehicle right side up.

With most of their anti-aircraft defences neutralized, the rebels were practically sitting ducks for any UNSC gunship moving in to make a strafing pass.

Unfortunately for them, this was exactly what the pilots of a pair of D77-TC Pelican gunships of the 42nd New Sparta Marine Air-Wing were hoping for.

Along with the Thunderbird, the Pelicans had followed the convoy from a distance ever since it departed for the New Athens Spaceport. While they could have handled the rebel's rag-tag fleet of Warthogs fairly easily, the potential risk of the rebels calling in their own air support was too great. As well, strict UNSC military doctrine demanded that any rescue and/or ground assault be provided an

overhead fighter sweep, so as to clear the path towards the target.

And now, with the threat of potential ground-to-air fire support neutralized, the gunships were finally able to move in for the kill.

As well as deliver a certain surprise package for the rebels to enjoy.

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Aizen was not accustomed to the feeling of desperation.

However, as he and his men cowered behind the skeleton remains of his CV, he could not claim to be impassive as the strange Gracemarian aircraft mercilessly tore his militia to pieces. With all of his M12's destroyed and his people in complete disarray, he knew that his chances of survival were steadily decreasing.

Amusingly, this in itself would provide a new justification for Insurrectionist militias throughout the Inner Colonies. Should news spread of his apparent demise, he would become a martyr in his fight for freedom from the tyrannical occupation by the United Earth Government forces.

Not that he truly intended to accept that fate so easily.

As he considered his options, a new sound arose over the explosions around him. It was louder than his scattered ATV's; yet still distinguishable from the aircraft butchering his men.

Thrust-Vector Engines!

Aizen scowled at this new obstacle._ 'So they intend to take me in for interrogation. Why else would they send in their gunships?'

Unfortunately, his men had expended most of their grenades and rockets during the assault against the baited convoy; which, in hindsight, presented their carelessness in preserving their ammunition. Even if this issue had been prevented, there was little they could do to match the firepower of the approaching aircraft.

Unless, they could call upon their own air support to help even the odds placed against them.

Aizen turned to his radio operator. "Contact Demon flight, and inform them of our situation. It's time to burn these cowardly pigs for their incompetence."

[illegible]

****Mt. Robinson, Moon Roberious, Sigma Leo System****

****Orbital Defence Station Archangel â€" Shipyards R-33****

November 28***th*****, 2550: 19:07 (UNSC Military calendar)**

Admiral Robert J. Boyce watched silently as the holotable before him played back the events that had transpired between Reaper-1 and Aizen's depleting band of rebel fighters.

All around him, several technician specialists worked at the multiple consoles and monitors that were responsible for maintaining the UNSC Orbital Defence Station Archangel and the Gracemarian Shipyards R-33, at the base of Mt. Robinson, high above on the Roberious Moon.

However, while the moon itself was awe-inspiring in its own right, it paled in comparison to the sight that reflected from the planet below: the clear, untainted skies of Gracemaria.

At nearly one point five times the size of Earth, the planet of Gracemaria was considered the crown-jewel of all the colonies throughout the Sigma Leo System. First colonized during the late 25th Century, the planet had played a key role in the further expansion of Humanity throughout the neighbouring systems. Its economy was originally based around agricultural development, with maize and wheat providing the backbone of its farming industry.

By the summer of 2550, Gracemaria had a population of approximately 52.4 million citizens – most of which hailed from the Balkans, Canada and Greece –, expanding throughout the two main continents of North and South Ionia. While the colonists had expanded along the continental coastline and throughout the entire landmass, its key Central Hubs were based around its two capital cities of New Sparta (North Ionia) and New Athens (South Ionia).

During the early establishment of settlements during the 2490's, local demographers tended to compare the physical geography of the two continents to that of Ancient Greece. The main features of the northern continent consisted of vast plains of maize and wheat fields, alongside patches of lush – not kidding – conifer and broad leaf forests; these in turn were surrounded by mountain ranges that would put the Rocky Mountains to shame. In fact, the capital city of New Sparta – named after the city state of the original Spartans – was located at the base of said mountains.

It was also the home of the 303rd Sparta 'Hoplite' Battle Corp – the joint military High Command of the entire Gracemarian Armed Forces.

First established in 2541, the 303rd was the UNSC response to the growing Insurrectionist movement on Gracemaria and its neighbouring colonies. Like most of the outer colonies before/during the early years of the Human-Covenant War, the Insurgent Militia had spread like wild fires across the two continents. However, unlike most of the Inner Colonies, the United Republic of Gracemaria had adopted a more effective policy towards battling the growing Gracemarian Reformation Movement, led by the former Colonel Aizen and his followers.

While the insurgent movement was indeed significant in the North, it was far worse throughout the southern continent.

Like its northern neighbor, South Ionia's geography was vastly dominated by Mountains and conifer forests, though its central

provinces were consistent with rolling sand dunes and boulder-littered plateaus. And while both North and South Ionia were affected an oceanic/continental climate â€" warm summers and mild winters â€" the interior provinces of the southern continent were affected by pro-continental weather patterns (hot summers and cold, dry winters).

It was here that the GRM was strongest: the sand dunes and rocky terrain provided sound protection from roaming UNSC Satellite and Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle (UCAV) surveillance drones. As such, the GRM was free to travel throughout the interior provinces without the threat of encountering stiff defences from the few, isolated UNSC border outposts.

During its first decades of existence, the GRM held the advantage in political influence, through manipulation of the supporting branches of the South Ionian government. With this trump card behind them, they were free to establish military recruitment camps in some of the still under-developed communities throughout the interior provinces.

However, this changed dramatically following the rise of several key factors: the discovery of the Forerunner structures throughout North Ionia in the late 2540's; the defection of the former Captain Tier Harribel and her lieutenants â€" no less thanks to the actions and beliefs of a certain UN Marine â€" now Spartan-VI super soldier; and the official recognition of Gracemaria's political independence from the United Earth Government in 2549.

Surprisingly, the Gracemarian movement for independence had concluded in mixed, if not satisfactory, results: While the planet was still a direct Dominion to the UEG, it was now able to govern its own economic and colonial defence policies.

Basically, Gracemaria was to the UEG like Canada was to the British Empire during the 19th-20th Centuries.

Now, what was once the most feared terrorist group on the planet was reduced to a few small bands of renegades, surviving on what little scraps of technology and weapons they could attain.

They were desperate and vulnerable; the perfect opportunity for the UNSC to end their presence on Gracemaria once and for all.

Even now, Aizen and his men were suffering the same baptism of fire that the Spartans of old had raised from the pits of Hell against the Persians at Thermopylae.

Unfortunately, as Robert himself was well aware of, no plan survives contact with the enemy. And this would most likely be no different; it always paid off to expect the unexpected.

"Well Admiral; quite the hell of a day to be in the military, eh?"

Robert turned his head to the computer screen just above the holotable, from which the image of General Daren G. 'Panzer' Patton â€" the commanding officer of the Gracemarian 7th Panzer Army Division â€" was displayed, in view of the Command Centre of ODS Archangel.

Ever since their youth, Robert and Patton had shared a key interest in the history of military tactics. Once they had attained their College degrees in 2524, both immediately enlisted into the UNSC military, with Robert joining the navy, and Patton into the Army. While most Army and Navy personnel often maintained their distance in most military operations, both had developed an near-unbreakable friendship.

Robert couldn't help but smirk at his friend's sarcasm. "Knowing you, Pat, I'd say that you were bored out of your mind."

"Hey, unlike you Navy guys, I prefer to get in the enemy's face, instead of just sitting on my ass, waiting for something to happen."

"Well, we Navy guys prefer to actually plan ahead before we launch an offensive, unlike some certain Army Boys that I fail to mention!"

Patton appeared to be offended. "Hey, we 'Army Boys' have our reputations to consider. And since when did you start complaining about my methods?"

"Frankly, I'd be amazed if no one else in the Army doubted your skills at all."

Robert inwardly smirked at his counterpart's expression to his sarcasm; he enjoyed mocking his comrade's status within the military at no end. Of course, this friendly banter wasn't quite the case throughout the past few weeks.

During the initial preparations of Operation _Just Cause_ â€" the joint Army-Air Force ambush against Colonel Aizen and his insurgents â€" Patton had practically begged for Robert to allow him leeway in strategizing the Army's role throughout the operation.

At the same time, their Air Force counterpart, General Daniel 'Talon' McClampton, had specifically requested for Patton's permission for the Army's new Robotic Control Interface (RCI) technology. The idea was to use the robot vehicles to lure Aizen and his troops out into the open; then, once Aizen had taken the bait, ambush them with air support and gunships.

At first, Patton wasn't entirely pleased to be assigned the role of the decoy; like his ancestral relative from the twentieth century, Patton had a habit of becoming aggressive during military engagements.

It was after McClampton had requested the inclusion of the Army's recently commissioned Spartan-IV Program that Patton â€" hesitantly â€" accepted the proposition.

Whatever witty comeback Patton had been forming in his head was interrupted by the technician at the controls of the ODS Satellite Camera monitor.

"Sir, SATCAM's picked up a squadron of bogies closing in on Reaper-1's position, coordinates Beta-eighty-nine-Sierra-thirty-four; range is two-hundred-forty-seven clicks, closing fast."

The command centre turned silent as Robert approached the monitor for the Satellite Coverage and Assessment Mechanism, which was responsible for monitoring air traffic all across Gracemaria. As he analysed the tactical readout for the Iskandar Province, he could clearly make out the icons symbolizing the Pelicans of Falcon flight and Reaper-1.

As well as a flight of unknown aircraft on an intercept course.

Before the initiation of Operation _Just Cause_, all civilian air traffic within Iskandar Province had been grounded to prevent the possibility of potential collateral damage during the battle. If any commercial aircraft had accidentally entered the area, a second HSB-79 waiting on standby would be able to escort the lost aircraft to New Seattle Spaceport, _after_ reporting in to Archangel about the incident.

Since no communication with the second Thunderbird had been established as of yet, that left only one conclusion.

The rebels had called in their own air support.

Robert turned to the communications officer, his face as hard as steel. "Contact Reaper-1, and get those gunships out of there, NOW."

The aid turned to the instrument panel in front of him, frantically trying to establish contact with the HSB-79 down below.

"This is Archangel to Reaper-1, General McClampton, do you copy?" As the technician fiddled with the console, all that came from the radio was cold, hard static. "Reaper-1, please respond." After several nerve-racking seconds, the aid turned to Robert. "I can't establish a secure comm. link with them Admiral; the signal's being jammed by an unknown source."

Robert's brow wrinkled in thought. "Can you locate the source of the jamming?"

The aid fidgeted nervously as he responded. "I'm trying, but the signal's too messed up to pinpoint the jammer's source. It might take some time to gain a precise location, butâ€"

Robert shook his head in frustration. "We'll worry about that later; do the best you can to get through to Reaper-1."

Giving an affirmative "Yes Sir," the aid turned back to his station, desperately trying to break through the static.

Patton's voice rang out from beside the holotable, "What in Sam Hell's going on up there, Robert?"

When Robert turned to the monitor, his apprehension must have been obvious, since Patton fell silent as saw the expression upon his face. "We've lost contact with Reaper-1, and the rebels seem to have called in a few allies of their own: We've picked up a squadron of rebel aircraft on route as we speak."

"WHAT? There wasn't supposed to be any other Innies support in that area. Where the Hell did the reinforcements come from?"

"I don't know, Pat, and right now, I can't tell for certain if they're working alone either.

After a brief moment, Patton's face turned pale. "You think she was behind all this?

Robert nodded slowly, brooding before he answered. "It wouldn't be the first time she used her ONI status to screw us up for her own ambitions."

"If that's the case, I'll prep a team for immediate departure; there's no way in Hell I'm about to let that damn women throw those soldiers' lives away just to please her own damn desires."

Robert smirked, "You actually think the package won't be enough to even the odds?"

"You seem to have a lot of faith in his skills."

"I should; he is a Spartan after all."

Though still doubtful, Patton grudgingly nodded his head in agreement. Like his Navy counterpart, he too was well aware of the Spartan's experience in situations similar to what was taking place on the planet's surface.

Of course, being the grandson of one of the most important military personal in the UNSC Navy also had its advantages.

Even during his childhood, Robert's grandson displayed a strong intellect in military tactics, while maintaining his sense of honor and faith in his friends and family. When he had joined the Gracemarian Marine Corps " and later the new Spartan-IV program " , Robert was among the first to provide his recommendation for his grandson's enlistment. As well, he had become a close comrade and ally to the growing Gracemarian Independence Militia " considering his connections with the IIM's leader, Colonel Harribel.

However, while he was among the highest ranking officers within the UNSC, he still worried for his grandson every time he was sent into action.

And with the sudden arrival of the GRM reinforcements, it was the experience he had attained during his years of service in the UNSC Navy that enabled him to maintain a cool head.

_'I just hope Daniel can do the same, for all their
sakes.'_

[illegible]

****25,000 ft., Iskandar Province****

****November 28****th****, 2550: 18:20****

General Daniel 'Talon' McClampton watched as the monitor displayed the rebels attempting to take cover among the sparse rock formations

alongside the highway. What few vehicles remained intact had been abandoned, their previous owners realizing that wheels would never outrun the Grim Reaper above them; they could see the aircraft circling like a vulture drawn to the smell of death.

Sarah checked the targeting module in front of her, practically begging for the rebels to make a move. "Tangos showing no attempt of relocating, primary target...Sweet Jesus, primary target at three o'clock, taking a _Shit _behind target one. Heh heh, Looks like the 'King of Gracemaria' just got dethroned!"

Daniel cringed, remembering the title Aizen had given himself following his fallout with the South Ionian military. The former Colonel did have a tendency to become arrogant about his status within the military. As such, it wasn't that surprising when he had decided to fund an insurrection movement against his former comrades.

Putting said thoughts aside, he preoccupied himself with checking the Thunderbirds onboard radar; the last thing they needed was to be ambushed by any insurgent reinforcements getting the jump on them while they were distracted.

As he scanned the radar scope for contacts, he couldn't help but notice the T-41 monitor screen begin to lose focus before returning to normal. The Thunderbird's Type-41 Identification Friend-or-Foe (IFF) Black Box was still in the experimental stage for military operations. First developed during the Vietnam War, the IFF enabled pilots to identify oncoming aircraft and confirm whether they were squadron mates or potential enemies. Even by the 26th Century, this was essential during every aerial engagement, especially with beyond-visual-range (BVR) weapons systems. And while it was developed and proposed as a replacement for the older Type-38 model, the T-41 was still in the experimental stage.

However, despite the Type-41's initial setbacks, the fact that it still appeared to require maintenance unnerved Daniel's sense of confidence.

The radio suddenly barked to life as the lead Pelican tried to establish contact with their heavy escort.

"This is Falcon-lead to Reaper-1; hopin' y'all ain't planning on takin a detour up there!"

Daniel frowned as he opened a link to the gunships down below. "This is Reaper-1 to Falcon lead; you aren't losing us that easily, over"

"Well' someone forgot to tell that to ole' Archangel up there, cause we ain't gettin' squat o'er the radio! An' it looks like our radar and IFF just decided to go n' kick th' bucket."

Daniel immediately opened a joint-connected radio link between the Thunderbird and the Pelicans, while chasing a connection with Admiral Boyce on the ODP up in orbit. Since the Thunderbird was still an experimental aircraft, it was understandable if a few of its systems encountered some technical issues.

But for both his plane and the Pelicans to lose their Radar and IFF

systems: Not a chance.

"Secure channel, Zeta-zero-nine-six-four-one; this is Reaper-1 to Archangel, do you copy, over. I repeat, Zeta-zero-nine-six-four-one; Archangel please respond."

"Arch...pear-1, you've...ogeys at Beta...spond, ov..."

Daniel checked the radio link in an attempt to strengthen the signal. "Uh, copy Archangel, please repeat that, you're breaking up, over."

"Repea...bital Defence Sta...incoming bogeys, ran...ease respond..."

"Repeat, Reaper-1 to Archangel, you're breaking up, over."

"This is Falcon-2 to Reaper-1; we've got a problem over here..."

Sarah couldn't help but groan in annoyance. "This is Reaper-1 to Falcon-2; what 'sort of problem' are you having?"

"Our ETWS and IFF just quit out on us; we're trying to reboot the systems, but nothing's â€" wait, is that a â€" WHAT THE FU..."

The transmission cut out as an air-to-air missile streaked in out of the night, and turned the Pelican into a fireball.

"SHIT! EVASIVE MANOEUVRES; POP FLARES."

Sarah was already furiously working at the controls as her CO shouted out the orders. Chaffs of Aluminum flares were released as the Thunderbird pulled a seven-G turn.

The heavy bomber shuddered as several streaks of light soared across its canopy, some flying off and disappearing into the night sky, while the rest targeted the strips of aluminum chaff. Several more missiles tracked the surviving gunship down on the deck, though it too avoided their murderous barrage.

If not for Sarah's piloting skills, their aircraft would have been little more than flame and debris.

"WHERE THE FUCK DID **THOSE** COME FROM?"

Too shocked to answer Sarah's cry, Daniel could only watch as the spiraling fireball marked the death of the men onboard Falcon-2. Barely hours before, he had requested for volunteer pilots who would take part in this operation. As some of the best soldiers in the UNSC air force, the men of Falcon-2 had great potential in their occupation.

And now they were gone, further more casualties inflicted by Aizen's followers.

Ironically, the loss of Falcon-2 was what saved the Thunderbird from its near inevitable demise.

And it was a demoralizing realization for the survivors.

"This is Falcon-lead to Reaper-1; what th' Hell's going' on up there? Where the fuck did those missiles come from?"

Daniel quickly opened a link to the gunship. "Reaper-1 to Falcon-lead; get the FUCK out of here, NOW! We'll cover your escape!"

"Don' have to tell me twice, Reaper-1," came the reply as the lone Pelican veered sharply to lose any other missiles that may have been tracking them. _"Fuckin' Hell; how th' Heck did this happen'? They were jus' kids' fer cryin' out loud!"_

It was then that another voice came in over the radio: _"...peat, this is Orbital Defence Station Archangel to Reaper-1; please respond immediately!"_

Daniel immediately opened an open channel, anxious to NOT lose the signal again. "This is Reaper-1 to Archangel; I'm sure as hell hoping you can explain what's happening right now!"

A new " and familiar " voice came over the radio. _"Reaper-1, this is Admiral Boyce; while I'm glad you're still alive, I'm afraid that you're not out of the woods yet. SATCAM's picked up a flight of unidentified bogeys approaching your position. It seems that Aizen's called in reinforcements to cover his escape. You should be receiving the targeting data right now."_

No sooner had the Admiral finished his sentence when Sarah checked the Thunderbird's radar monitor, which had begun tracking a flight of new targets just off the Thunderbirds nose.

"Unidentified contacts, approximately one-hundred-thirty-seven clicks due north, checking readouts... Targets confirmed: Five GA-TL1 Longsword-class interceptors, moving at approximately Mach 2.7." Sarah's disbelief became apparent as she tracked the flight path of the oncoming aircraft. "These planes are marked as Model-G aircraft, ONI-based designs. How the fuck did Aizen get a hold of these? No way could even he find these damn things on his own!"

"No time to worry about that now," Daniel responded as he activated the radio. "Falcon-lead, proceed westward at Mark-seventy-four-dash-sixteen out of the area. We'll contact you once the bogeys have been dealt with."

"Rodger that, Reaper-1; we're proceeding westwards now. Give those fuckin' bastards hell for us!"

Once the surviving Pelican had withdrawn, Daniel and Sarah could focus on the oncoming insurrection aircraft. The last thing they wanted to happen was to be jumped from behind while having to protect the lone gunship at the same time.

And with the odds stacked against them at five to one, the aspect of 'quality over quantity' was needed to survive the next few minutes.

And the HSB-79 Thunderbird was the aircraft that could get the job done.

Based off the Bl-B Lancer design from the 21st Century, the Thunderbird was a marvel to fly: It literally took speed, manouverability, and firepower to a whole new level. While the venerable Longsword interceptor was the frontline air-space superiority aircraft for the UNSC throughout the Insurrection and Human-Covenant War, it faced severe drawbacks in terms of numbers and availability of resources. As such, the Thunderbird was designed as a multi-purpose aircraft; capable of providing anti-armor and anti-shipping ordinance support.

When called upon to provide maximum firepower against an overwhelming enemy force, the Thunderbird was equipped with a lethal arsenal of four LRCM-240 Jericho Cruise Missiles, twelve medium-range AIM-290 Seeker Missiles, and eighteen LRAAM-320 Radar-guided Viper Missiles.

Often, during peacetime, the HSB-79 aircraft were armed with medium-range multi-purpose AIM-290 Heat-Seeker missiles; this was in case of surprise attacks from Insurrectionist Militia hiding throughout the mountainous terrain of the South Ionian continent. Like their predecessors, the AIM-290's were designed for air-to-air and air-to-ground military operations; the perfect killing tool for assaulting enemy armoured convoys and boarding/gunship aircraft.

However, while the AIM-290 Heat-seeker missiles were often the popular choice for UNSC pilots, they would prove to be of little help against the oncoming Longsword's. The AIM-290 was designed for medium-range aerial combat, often used in the event that an aircraft's long-range missiles failed to track. In order to allow the AIM-290 to acquire its target, the Thunderbird would have to close the distance between itself and the oncoming Longsword aircraft "well within range of the Longsword's Radar-detection system.

And when faced against a numerically superior adversary equipped with aircraft that had the advantage of manouverability, becoming involved in a close-range brawl was not something Daniel wanted to become involved in.

Sarah pushed the control yolk forward just enough to drop the Thunderbird's nose slightly so as to gain missile lock on the oncoming aircraft. This also enabled her to maintain beyond-visual-range (BVR) lock on the oncoming aircraft without compromising the Thunderbirds stealth capabilities.

Daniel analyzed the oncoming squadron as he spoke to his co-pilot. "Activate auto-targeting, and prepare to engage LRAAM's; lock BVR onto the lead tango and his wingmen. Designate targets as Master's 16 to 21; set the Vipers DFC timer for point-zero-one upon impact."

Sarah's fingers were a blur as she programmed the targeting reticule for the LRAAM's onboard long range Radar tracking system. Both pilots could hear the bass tone of the Thunderbirds Radar-guidance system growling in their headsets, indicating the targeting module of the LRAAM's as it tracked the oncoming bombers. Soon, the growl became a roar as the LRAAM's finally attained a solid lock.

"We've got solid lock; Vipers are armed and ready," Sarah called out.

"I got 'em." Daniel barely hesitated for a moment before he pressed the trigger. "Firing missiles!"

Daniel watched as the Vipers dropped from the bomber's weapons bay, and streaked across the evening sky, their smoke trails barely visible on the Thunderbirds infra-red equipped monitor screen.

By the time the Longsword pilots realized they had been targeted by the Thunderbird, it was already too late as " just seconds after they were launched " the LRAAM's reached their designated targets. As if driven by revenge for the downed Pelican, four Vipers tracked and struck the Longsword responsible for the deaths of their comrades.

Packing a payload of 60lb. of high explosive in its Sabot-tipped warhead, the LRAAM-320 Viper was among the most powerful long-range weapons wielded by the Gracemarian Air Defence Corps (GADC). With a top speed of Mach 5.4 in full thrust, the Viper was equipped with the new MK-XV Delayed-Fuse Control (DFC) mechanism: Upon impact, the Viper utilized its speed and velocity to puncture the outer hull of its target, its preset delayed-fuse charge allowing the warhead to punch through to the Longsword's weaker inner-hull.

It was then that the Vipers' warheads detonated, their 60lb. charges lighting up the sky in a brilliant display of fire and destruction. There was barely anything left after the fireball vanished from existence.

The other rebel pilots fared little better as the remaining missiles tracked their designated targets with deadly efficiency. Within moments of each other, three more Longsword's were transformed into balls of flame and debris. The Viper had once again left its deadly calling card, with devastating results.

Ironically, it was the lead bomber " the initial target " that survived the deadly barrage of missiles. It was clear that this pilot was an experienced veteran in aerial combat: By chopping his power and launching high-heat magnesium flares, the pilot was able to confuse and lose the Vipers' onboard radar system.

By this time, the Thunderbird had entered the Longsword's effective Radar detection range. Of course, as the aircraft closed the distance, the advantage of stealth was effectively thrown out the window.

Sarah analysed the monitor screen as it projected the image of the rebel bomber. What she saw was not highly appealing.

"Shit, lead bogey's still flying; looks like he's picking up speed. He's altering course, heading zero-five-three...Fuck, he's heading right for us!"

Instead of fear and caution, Daniel's adrenaline peaked body shivered with aggression and anticipation.

"If he wants a fight, we'll sure as hell give him one. Increase speed and alter course to zero-five-three."

***"What?"**

"If we keep going, he'll get on our ass and rip us apart without a fight. If we meet him head on, we can turn the table in our favor."

"But we're all out of missiles; what are we gonna do, turn the plane into a frickin' battering ram?"

"You heard me, Sarah: Alter heading to course zero-five-three. And arm the Gladiator."

Sarah fell silent as she grasped her CO's intention; a devilish grin steadily spread across her face as she typed in the numbers on the controls before her. "Yes sir, General: heading to course zero-five-three and arming the Gladiator."

Once the heading was confirmed, the Thunderbird began to accelerate past Mach 2.6, steadily closing the distance between it and the Longsword.

This was often the crucial moment that dictated the difference between life and death for Bomber pilots. Often, the slower, lumbering bomber would prove to be of little threat for the faster, more nimble interceptor-class aircraft.

And with most of their air-to-air missiles exhausted, they were literary meat on the table for the rebel pilot.

However, the Thunderbird wasn't designed merely as a heavy bomber; when required, it could dogfight as well. This was a lesson taken from the Vietnam War during the 1960's and 1970's. During that time, new air-to-air missiles were becoming the new weapon of choice for American politicians and high ranking military personal. As such, military planners had brought the existence of guns into question, believing it to be of little significance in the future of aerial warfare.

This attitude changed as the air war over North Vietnam turned hot. While these new missiles were 'promising' in the political perspective, they were deemed as more of a hindrance to pilots fighting over Downtown Hanoi. By the summer of 1969, the estimated ratio for missile kills in the skies over Vietnam was one-point-one out of ten.

At the same time, most of the US pilots sent to Vietnam had little/no aerial combat training, like their predecessors during the Second World War and Korean War. Sadly, the loss of American aircraft to Vietnamese MiG's, SAM's and AA Batteries weighed at nearly thirty-seven aircraft shot down per month, _at minimum_.

Consequently, the gun once again became a priority armament for American fighter aircraft. As well, in 1969, the US Air Force and Navy initiated the new Top Gun Air Training Program to help train new recruits in the art of Dogfighting. Thankfully, these factors had remained throughout the following centuries, and were later applied to the new space aero fighter in the 23rd Century.

So as to provide their pilots with every chance of surviving a close-in Dogfight, the Gracemarian Air Defence Corps had developed an

advanced version of its famous 20th Century antecedent. This program was intended to educate new pilots how to manage high-speed BVR, treetop-level 'Wild Weasel', close-combat 'Fur-ball' and joint-strike package aerial tactics and manoeuvres. Sometimes, even standard ground crew were required to partake in these aerial 'War Games', in the event that standard pilots were too gravely injured to fly. As a result, everyone from fighter to bomber pilots was well versed and educated in aerial warfare.

For armament, in addition to its air-to-air missiles, the Thunderbird was armed with an M578 Vulcan 20mm Rotary Cannon and an M709 Avenger II 30mm Gladiator Cannon. The M578 Vulcan was the UNSC's primary close-range offensive weapon for most atmosphere defence fighters, with a firing rate of ten thousand 7.62 inch rounds per minute.

Its counterpart, the M709 Gladiator, was designed with the intended purpose of providing close-range Mobile Anti-Drop-ship Defence support. As such, the Gladiator had a much heavier fire rate of ten thousand 30mm 105-Sabot rounds per minute. Simply put, the Gladiator was designed to engage enemy bombers and medium class naval warships.

It was upon this weapon that Daniel and Sarah had placed their lives " and those of the surviving gunship " to turn the tide against the oncoming Longsword.

On any other occasion, it would have been considered overkill.

After watching more of their friends die at the hands of Aizen's followers, overkill was precisely what Daniel and Sarah wanted.

For them and the Marines onboard the lone Pelican, there were only two potential outcomes to this brawl: emerge victorious or die.

At five miles, Daniel immediately locked up the rebel bomber on the Gladiator's targeting scope, and pressed the trigger. The M709 roared as 30mm-105 Magnesium-tipped Sabot rounds ripped through the enemy bomber.

The rebel decided to open fire with his own quadruple 120mm Ventral Anti-Drop-ship guns and M9109 ASW/AC cannons at three and a half miles; this was to be the last mistake he would ever make. A quick five second burst " nearly nine hundred rounds of high-heat sabot rounds " slashed the Longsword's engines and fuel tanks a split second before the rebel squeezed the trigger. What remained of the rebel aircraft spiraled down to the ground in a fireball; there was little possibility that the pilot had ejected safely.

"YES! We nailed the Bastard. Lead Tango is down." Daniel pumped his fist in the air as he cheered in triumph.

"WAHOO! Good shooting, Dan," Sarah called when the bomber disappeared from her tactical display. "This is Reaper-1 to Falcon lead, the sky is clear; you're free to engage. Have a nice day!"

"Thanks for th' help Reaper-1," the Irish Marine radioed. "The package is ready for delivery. He'll radio once that cowardly fuckin' shithole is tagged or bagged!"

"Copy that, Falcon lead; Reaper-1

out."

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Aizen could only watch in horror as the last of his bombers crashed into the hillside just beyond the crevice in which he took sanctuary. And with it his last best chance of escaping his pursuers and their hounds.

After one of the enemy gunships was shot down, the flight of Freelancer bombers had contacted him that they would cover his escape to the West, where an ONI stealth aircraft would take him to a secure facility just on the outskirts of New Sparta. This was followed shortly by the sudden appearance of long-range missiles that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere.

What remained of his ambush party had gathered around their surviving ATV's and were readying themselves for a quick breakthrough to their reserve rendezvous just twelve miles from the highway.

It was then that the surviving gunship appeared over the rolling hillside.

Aizen immediately threw himself back down into the crevice that had sheltered him throughout the duration of the battle.

His followers were not so fortunate.

Aizen could only remain concealed as he listened to the sound of his men as they screamed " those who could " in agony and shock as they were literally ripped to shreds by the Pelicans heavy cannons and rockets.

As such, he didn't see the figure that had dropped out of the gunship's rear compartment, and was closing the distance to his temporary refuge.

Only once the last few insurgents were wiped out did the gunship cease its murderous barrage. Aizen stood and watched in silent fear " and fury " as the Pelican took to the air.

"DAMN YOU, COWARDS! YOU WILL PAY FOR YOUR INSOLANCE! I SWEAR UPON THE LIVES YOU HAVE SLAUGHTERED THIS DAY, "

"Are you talking to me?"

Aizen paused in his charade, pulling out his ceremonial M6D Magnum as he turned his head in the direction the mysterious voice had originated...

And came face to face with what appeared to be a massive, humanoid figure.

Clad from head to toe in awe-worthy, the figure easily outsized the former Colonel in terms of height and muscular physique. Despite his vision being limited by the darkened environment, Aizen could easily make out the being's outline against the still burning hulks of his assault vehicles.

And he knew exactly what this figure was, as did anyone who came face

to face with said being.

'A Spartan; so, her descriptions of these 'super-soldiers' were correct. A pity none of the Sigma or Omega recruits were worthy of joining us...unlike the Alphas and Betas.'

As he considered his next course of action, he couldn't help but consider another alternative option: Since running would only result in his eventual capture, and to engage the Spartan in combat was border-line suicide, there wasn't much else that would be of any relief to his current predicament.

Unless, his fear-racked conscious argued, he could somehow persuade the Spartan to swear his allegiance to him and his cause. If he could attain its loyalty to serve his ambitions, he could reclaim his rightful place as ruler of Gracemaria.

Of course, in reality, the odds of said outcome were severely slim, if not downright ludicrous. But in his twisted, shell-shocked mind, it was the best option available to him.

Before he could speak, in hopes of confirming the Spartan's allegiance, it was the latter that moved first.

Faster than humanly possible, the Spartan rushed forward, rolling under Aizen's line of vision, appearing just beneath his right shoulder.

Aizen barely had time to fire off a single shot, much less acknowledge the sudden flash of pain from the Spartan's fist connecting with his abdomen. He let out a pain filled grunt as he reeled over in agony. His entire chest and abdomen felt like several spikes had been pressed into his body, no doubt from his ribs barely absorbing the blow from the Spartan's assault.

Just as suddenly, he found himself lifted off the ground, with one of the Spartan's gauntlet's grasping his uniform's collar. Looking up, he saw the Spartan towering over him, his expression invisible behind his visor.

Aizen's eyes then fell upon his pistol, now clutched in the Spartan's armored fist; he could only watch as the latter crushed it into a worthless clump of metal.

Aizen's wheezed deeply, his eyes widening at the sight of the Spartan standing over him. "You..._what_ are you?"

Instead of answering, the Spartan leaned in towards the barely struggling terrorist...and promptly head-butted him with a resounding 'clunk'.

The last thing Aizen saw was the number 208 on the Spartan's chest-plate before darkness overtook his vision.

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The armored being looked down at the silent form of Colonel Aizen, whom had begun developing a signature bruise where his helmet had connected; a far more suitable response to the coward's question than

any corny one-liner.

After confirming that the former colonel would indeed survive his head injury, the Spartan then focused his eyes to the bomber orbiting above him. Once again the newest addition to the fleet of aircraft and vehicles of the 303rd Sparta hoplite Battle Corps had proven its worth in combat.

Unfortunately, it had also come at a price.

He too had witnessed the death of the second Pelican, and silently prayed that they had perished swiftly; no one deserved to endure a prolonged, agonizing death.

Further more lives wasted by the murderer that now lay insentient at his feet.

And yet the ONI brass of Sector 3 continuously 'requested' that he remain alive, for his interrogation of any 'potential information' concerning the background information of the insurrectionist movement throughout the entire inner colonies. As such, a certain ONI tech-head on Gracemaria had made it her sworn duty to 'influence' the necessity to bring him back alive and in one piece.

This meant he was forced to hold back his attacks, while restraining the former Colonel with minimal aggression.

Yes, he had followed that order. And it really, really pissed him off.

The figure shook his head in annoyance, his training the only thing helping him to control his steadily increasing bitterness toward said tech-head. Of course, it wasn't that surprising that she had forced her hand into military matters for the "quite possibly" umpteenth time during the past five years. What truly amazed, and infuriated him, was that her actions were overlooked by the higher ups in the UNSC military.

As he scanned the surrounding terrain, his helmet's heads-up display provided a 3-D image of the surrounding terrain. As well as his armor's shield and health bar, he could see the remains of the rebel's assault force, all of which was little more than burning debris.

The sound of thrust engines interrupted his musings, causing him to turn his attention to the West, where his helmet displayed a small outcropping of boulders just beyond the rolling plateau.

More specifically, the Pelican gunship lifting off from behind said outcropping.

"What the hellâ€|"

The figure watched as the gunship activated its booster engines and rocketed upwards towards the planet's atmosphere. As it disappeared into the night, his helmet was able to catalogue the gunships design and origin: The D78-SO/TC Nighthawk Special Ops gunship "the stealth version of the D77-TC Pelican" was nearly impossible to track once it climbed above 25,000 feet; its stealth equipped airframe made it the ideal method of transportation for covert ops

And expensive, to build and to buy; hell, the UNSC could purchase an entire squadron of Shortsword bombers in exchange for a single Nighthawk. As such, it was considered by the head personal of the UNSC military branches too costly to fund full scale construction of the prototype stealth ship.

Apparently, despite its financial expense, the eggheads at ONI had deemed the Nighthawk as necessary for their under-the-table operations throughout the Inner Colonies.

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While as of yet unproven, there were escalating rumours that some ONI officials were engaged in illegal military partnerships with the Insurrection movement on Reach and Gracemaria. Officially, there was little/no actual proof that these rumours contained any sense of authenticity. Consequently, any attempt to verify these connections were put down by ONI officials, with the accusing factions having seemingly vanished from existence.

And, maybe, the loss of some of the UNSC's best Marines and pilots would push the Gracemarian pencil pushers to re-consider ONI's leeway in military operations.

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_This is Spartan-208; the target is secure. I repeat: the target is
secure; we have
him."
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[illegible]

before him.

The human had willingly remained behind to fight him in combat, so that his comrades could flee to survive another day. For a short time, the human had fought bravely and valiantly in spite of the inevitable fate that awaited him.

The fate that T'ekan had bestowed upon him only seconds before with the Energy Sword that was grasped in his hand.

The low throbbing of a Type-52 Phantom Troop Carrier passing overhead returned his attention to the ongoing battle in the distance.

T'ekan watched as the Phantom approached one of the human structures gleaming against the blackened sky, only to fall prey to a human artillery weapon concealed in the structure's shadow. It in turn was destroyed by the plasma torpedoes from a pair of scouting Banshees. Moments later, the lead fighter was obliterated by human rockets and artillery fire. Its wingman, determined to avenge its fallen comrade, became over confident and, after another burst of human artillery, fell to the ground in a ball of flame and debris.

While these minor victories were at times bothersome, they were too few " and costly " to be of any significance to the planet's fate.

These were sights and sounds that had become a common occurrence on this human world called Obraxeon. It was once a calm, peaceful planet, well known for its rolling mountains and calm shallow seas, most of which had been erased from existence over the past two months since its discovery by the Covenant. In spite of their fierce determination, the humans on this planet had slowly succumbed before the might of the Covenant.

T'ekan paused at the edge of a small cliff that overlooked the outskirts of the war-ravaged settlement before him. As he watched the battle before him, his thoughts drifted to an idealism that had begun to bloom throughout some of the clans within the Covenant. When the war against the humans had begun, his faith to his leaders " the High Prophets " was unwavering, as was that of his fellow warriors. It was said that only the true faithful would be bestowed the blessings of their Gods, and hence would have the privilege to walk the journey to transcendence: the path to the Great Journey.

However, his faith in this belief had recently become uncertain and questionable. Over the past few years, as they pushed further towards the human's inner worlds, several Sangheili officers " himself included " had begun to question the true purpose behind the Prophets desire to exterminate them from the galaxy.

T'ekan tore his gaze from the battle before him and glanced back at his latest victory. While doing so, he couldn't help but praise the human for his actions, though they were indeed desperate.

This was similar to several other engagements he had fought throughout this ongoing conflict, all from which he had emerged victorious. In spite of their primitive weapons and technology, these creatures were unwavering in their fight to survive. In fact, if not for the Covenant's advantages in numbers and technological supremacy,

humanity could match even the Sangheili as a battle worthy opponent. They could also, perhaps, attain the worthiness as allies to the Sangheili; far more so than the barbarous, cowardly Jiralhanae dogs.

The tone of his helmet's inner-linked communication device brought his attention from the devastation around him. He calmly raised his hand to activate his com-link, taking little notice to the Phantom approaching his position.

"_T'ekan Chre'om, the Shipmaster demands to speak with you."_

The Zealot-Elite grunted in acknowledgement at the communication helmsmen of the _Courage of Sangheili_ before adjusting his helmet's communication system to the Shipmaster's personal comm. channel.

"Greetings, Shipmaster. You require my service?"

"_The 'Fleetmaster' wishes to commence the cleansing of the planet ahead of schedule. You must alert your fellow brethren to his intentions before he begins."_

T'ekan's eyes briefly widened at the statement spoken by his commander, fully comprehending his Shipmaster's acidic tone while referring to the Fleetmaster. He was well aware of the Fleetmaster's ambition and lack of hesitation to carry out the requests of the Prophets " no matter the cost.

"I understand, Shipmaster. I will alert our warriors to evacuate this world immediately."

"_Then go, my friend, and may the Gods lend speed and protection to you and your warriors."_

T'ekan deactivated his com-link as the approaching Phantom descended down towards him. His helmet's heads-up display gave him a clear view of his intended transport as its side panels opened up to the world around it. He could already see H'rel Shokem " one of his most trustworthy Major Domo's among the Char'colum clan " standing ready at the Phantom's edge, searching the nearby human structures with his Type-51 Carbine Rifle. Throughout the duration of the war, many of his fellow warriors had fallen prey to human sniper teams, often while they were boarding their transports back to their Carrier in orbit. In spite of this tactic's effectiveness, it was considered to be cowardly and dishonorable to the Sangheili code of warfare.

However, having witnessed him in battle, T'ekan had great faith in H'rel's skill with long-range weaponry. Both had fought together from the day they had first served on the _Courage of Sangheili_, and could easily be mistaken for children of the same birth mother.

He waited for the Phantom to come within boarding range before he moved _away_ from the transport. He allowed his mandibles to form the Sangheili version of a grin as he readied himself for what he was about to do.

When the Phantom was within the estimated distance required, he began sprinting to the edge of the cliff, gathering speed as he neared the

Troopship before him. He could clearly see the surprised " and annoyed " expression upon H'rel's face. He had performed this stunt in the past, and took great delight in irking his comrade to no end.

Just before the point where the cliff dropped away to the war-ravaged street below, T'ekan gathered all of his strength and jumped. The battle hardened muscles and ligaments in his legs propelled him forward with tremendous velocity, covering the distance to the Phantom within a few seconds of flight. As he collided with the Dropship's opened hatchway, T'ekan rolled to deplete the speed attained in the leap. By the time his friend had turned his head; T'ekan was standing upright and regarding H'rel with an amused smirk.

To say that H'rel was irritated would be an understatement.

"Gods damn you, T'ekan; must you always put your life at risk performing such...reckless acrobatics every time you go into battle?"

T'ekan was trying hard not to laugh at his comrade's complaining, simply focusing his attention at securing his Energy Sword to his thigh. "One must insure their skills are always prepared for combat; otherwise, there would be no reason for either of us to take part on the battle field at all."

H'rel gave a short growling sigh to his friend's remark. "I swear upon the Prophets, I will never understand how the Shipmaster can tolerate your obsession for performing these ridiculous antics."

H'rel's words reminded T'ekan of when he was a Minor training to become the newest warrior of the Char'colam Clan " the Royal Zealot Elite Guard of the Sangheili High Council. Lead by the best sword wielders of the Sangheili culture, the Char'colam Clan was among the highest ranking military unit of the Covenant following the Great Unification. To become a member required unwavering loyalty and unmatched skill with the sword.

During his trials of passage, T'ekan displayed great courage and skill that was matched by only some of the veteran warriors. If not for some of his other characteristics, he would have been accepted after his first year of training.

Unfortunately, the most notable of these characteristics was his lack of practice in standard military protocol. According to the Sangheili Warrior Code of Honour, all trainees were demanded to display strict discipline and dedication throughout their edification. In contrast, T'ekan maintained his youthful, often carefree, personality throughout the duration of his education; sometimes, he was even caught lounging in the academic archives examining the ancient scrolls and scripts from the ancient history of Sangheilios' early existence before and after its acceptance into the Covenant.

The fact that he had managed to survive his first baptism of fire " much less achieve the status of Zealot " was as astounding as it was farcical.

Regardless, his loyalty to his fellow warriors and brothers-in-arms

was unshakable to the point of near fanaticism.

T'ekan then remembered the message he had received just minutes before. His expression turned grim, his moment of youthful innocence expended, as he relayed his orders. "We must hurry H'rel, and begin the evacuation of our forces immediately. The Fleetmaster has decided to begin the ceremonial cleansing of this planet early; we must leave as soon as possible."

H'rel stood rigid, his mandibles rigid with shock and disbelief, as T'ekan's words took effect. "By the Gods; surely you jest! How could...how could he...after what we have already endured. The Prophets would never agree to such an atrocious deciâ€".

"It was the Prophets who have demanded for the Fleetmaster to begin the cleansing. All we can â€" and must do is to ensure that our warriors are safely off this planet before it is too late." H'rel could see that even T'ekan was unnerved by his own words.

Both warriors remained silent for a brief moment before H'rel activated his helmet's comm. channel. "This is H'rel Shokem to all warriors of the Courage of Sangheili: The Fleetmaster is preparing to begin the ceremonial cleansing of this world ahead of schedule. All warriors are to report to the nearest drop zone for immediate evacuation."

Even as the Phantom lifted off above the remnants of the human settlement, several other Dropships began taking off for their own ships up in orbit above the planet. Thankfully, while some did bear the scars of battle, T'ekan was relieved that only a few of these belonged to the Courage of Sangheili.

As the Phantom began its ascendance into the atmosphere, T'ekan was able to gaze down at the world below just as the side hatches sealed shut.

It would be the last time he would view the planet's spectacle before it was transformed into little more than glass and charred ruins; he intended to witness its final moments before its trial of judgment was carried out.

During the early years of their war against the humans, T'ekan noted that most of their colonies were dominated by their cities and shipyards. This was of course reasonable since they were among the key nerve centers for their infrastructure throughout their outer colonies.

However, T'ekan couldn't help but admire the stark beauty of their latest triumph, its landscape of wide valleys, lush forests and mountainous coastlines and prairies. Unlike most of their other colonies, the humans had somehow managed to preserve such an image of natural marvel and acknowledgment for this particular system.

As such, T'ekan couldn't help but feel remorse for the loss of such remarkable magnificence that now lay below.

Another reason as to why he had become doubtful of the Prophet's ongoing Crusade against such a tenacious, honor worthy, adversary.

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CAC-class Assault Carrier **Courage**
of **Sangheili**

The Fleet of Eternal Holiness

Orbit of Colony Obraxeon

January 18th, 2551: 9:47 (UNSC Military Calendar)

Joram A'llaem, Sangheili Ultra of the Nor'illema clan of Sangheili, ambled silently towards the bridge of the CAC-class Assault Carrier Courage of Sangheili.

The ship's commander, Shipmaster Hara'-Sharem, had requested his presence by his side during the ceremonial cleansing of the human planet below them. Bestowed by the Prophets upon the embarking of this Great Crusade against the humans, it had become a highly praised ceremony throughout the last thirty years.

A ceremony that, in Joram's opinion, was little more than the massacre of an entire planet that meant little compared to the losses endured by his brothers.

During the initial invasion of the human colony of Obraxeon, he had led nearly seven thousand warriors of the Nor'illema clan into battle. They had all fought bravely, many having felled dozens of humans in honorable combat. Their skills of the Sword and tactical supremacy were unstoppable, as was expected from all of them.

Regardless of their courage, they were unable to overcome the most unexpected and dangerous obstacle they had ever encountered: the cold, murderous ambitions of the Fleetmaster under which they and the Courage of Sangheili served.

During their advance against the human stronghold, the flagship of the fleet, the Unrelenting Defiance, appeared high above Joram and his warriors. He had been tasked with leading the charge that would shatter the human resolve once and for all. With most of the fleet elsewhere across the planet, his warriors were required to control this position on their own, so as to clear the path for their fellow warrior clans to push forward.

As such, both he and his brothers were temporarily surprised to witness such an unusual event.

There surprise swiftly transformed to shock and fear as the Unrelenting Defiance began charging its plasma weapons, all targeting towards him and his warriors.

Now, barely twelve hundred, whom were all once loyal to the Covenant, now had returned to their ship disheartened and doubtful.

To the Fleetmaster, it was a noble sacrifice in their service to the Prophets and their path to the Great Journey.

This did little to ease the burden that clenched his heart like the cold metal that surrounded him as he walked.

"You are troubled, my friend,"

Joram was distracted from his thoughts by the arrival of his friend and comrade: Zealot T'ekan Chre'om. He too was on his way to the bridge, having just arrived from the planet's surface.

"Indeed I am, comrade," Joram replied, his voice filled with unspoken grief and shame.

T'ekan looked upon what remained of the once proud warrior, resting his hand on the Ultra's shoulder plate. "Do not fret yourself, brother. There was little you could have done for your deceased brethren."

Joram appeared to have not heard T'ekan's advisement. "I have lost my honour, as well as that of my warriors. I should have fallen along with them, rather than survive while they needlessly perished."

At this statement, T'ekan took hold of Joram's shoulder with a firm grip, forcing the Ultra to face him. "The outcome of that incident was not your doing, Joram A'llaem, Ultra of the Nor'illema clan. There is only one who is truly responsible. It was he who has disgraced himself and his image among our people. When the time comes, he will suffer for his treachery. Until that day arrives, you must remain strong, so as to lead your men in the days to come. They need your strength now, more than the dead need remorse and despair. They gave their lives in service of Sangheilios and to the Covenant, so that they could die without regret or shame."

Joram could only stare at the force behind T'ekan's words. Slowly, he regained his posture, his eyes gleaming with a new sense of purpose. "Thank you, T'ekan. I will remain strong, so that we may return to what we once were before that fateful day."

T'ekan nodded to his friend, lowering his hand to his side once more. "Now come, the Shipmaster requests out presence for the ceremonial cleansing of this world."

Both turned towards the doorway that led to the bridge, with T'ekan taking the lead as the doorway opened before them.

Joram followed his comrade through the doorway, his mind swirling with what T'ekan had spoken.

'_Justice will be served'_, he thought. '_I swear upon the spilled blood of my brothers, my sword will end your reign of cowardice and treachery.'

' _Allrem.' _

[illegible]

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**CAS ****_Courage of Sangheilios _****â€" Command
Bridge**
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Shipmaster Hara'-Sharem watched from his command chair as the fleet gathered for the ceremonial cleansing. All around him, the crew worked away at the controls responsible for maintaining the equipment needed for his ship to function.

He could sense that they were anxious, and rightly so: After what had transpired during the past few weeks, they were hesitant to test Hara'-Sharem's patience, or else suffer his barely contained rage. Of course, they were also facing difficulties withholding their own emotions towards what had transpired on the planet below them.

The loss of the warriors of the Nor'illema clan had been a devastating blow to the crew of the Courage of Sangheilios. Many of them had fought side by side ever since the crusade against the human race had begun, in space and on the ground. They had endured countless battles, had faced down their enemies in honorable combat, and had always emerged victorious. Their battle poems were of great inspiration for their children and their children's children. Hara'-Sharem himself could describe their actions as nothing less than legendary.

As such, when they had received news about how the Fleetmaster had willingly ordered his Battle Cruisers to open fire upon the human fortress where the Nor'illema warriors had begun their assault...well, to claim that they were furious would be an understatement.

To endure such staggering casualties, for no significant gain in territory or damage inflicted upon the enemy, had left a sour taste in the Shipmaster's mouth indeed.

It was for that reason that the Courage of Sangheilios had effectively cut all communications with the Unrelenting Defiance for the past few days. This was not only to allow the crew to mourn the loss of their brothers; it was also so that they could avoid the potential risk of the surviving Nor'illema warriors going war mad for revenge.

In fact, it was only the patience and self-control he had attained after decades of war that kept Hara'-Sharem from going blood-drunk upon the Fleetmaster and his loyalists for the betrayal they had committed.

His browsing was interrupted by the arrival of his two bravest warriors, and his closest friends.

Zealot T'ekan Chre'om and Ultra Joram A'llaem halted beside the command chair, thumping their fists on their chest plates and bowing their heads in respect for their Shipmaster.

"We have answered your beckoning, Shipmaster; how may we serve you this day?"

Hara'-Sharem turned his gaze to the two Sangheili warriors beside him, reflecting their

They had earned their ranks through the same Battlefield tradition: the number of enemies to have fallen to them in combat. Both Joram and T'ekan had earned their status as Ultra and Zealot through the hundreds of humans to have fallen to them during the past decades of war; Hara'-Sharem through the naval victories against the human forces in space.

"Be at ease my friends," the Shipmaster spoke as he nodded in

recognition to his fellow warriors. "It pleases me to see that you were able to bring your warriors safely back to us, T'ekan."

The Zealot nodded his head. "Indeed, Shipmaster, though I would rather not have to run from a fight for the sake of pleasing the desires of one who has shamed himself."

Hara' nodded, glancing over at the Ultra's silent figure before speaking. "You are troubled, Joram. Please, make your thoughts heard, my brother."

Joram seemed to shed his gaze ever so slightly from Hara's prying eyes. It was slight, but still noticeable. "Nothing troubles me, Shipmaster, be it physical or otherwise. I was...merely deep in thought."

Hara' couldn't help but flex his mandibles in a smirk at the Ultra's rambling.

"Regretfully, your proficiency in the art of deception is still of little equality to your skills with a sword."

Joram appeared to flex his mandibles in silent humility. Hara' frowned sympathetically at his comrade's stance of sombre silence.

"I understand your emotions, as do all those who were there to witness our Fleetmaster's actions. In truth, I doubt that there is any descent warrior on this ship who would not want to take action to avenge their fallen brethren."

"However, regardless of our emotions, we are still warriors of Sangheilios and the Covenant, and as such, we must do what is necessary to uphold our honor...even if some of us are unwilling to do so themselves."

Joram's battle armor shifted slightly as he heeded Hara's words. However, none of them were ignorant to the fact that the Shipmaster himself was doubtful as to whether his words would help justify the actions of he who had brought shame and resentment upon his people and his clan.

Sensing the growing tension among the helmsmen, T'ekan spoke up from beside the Shipmaster's command chair. "Tell us, Shipmaster: what news of the battle up here; have the humans sent additional ships to support their garrisons on the planet?"

Thankful for the Zealot's change in subjects, Hara' flexed his mandibles in satisfaction and pride. "As usual, the humans fought with great tenacity and tactical ingenuity, considering we outnumbered their fleet ten to one. While many of our brethren fell to their orbital defences, they died with honour and singing their family's battle songs all the way to the end."

"However, during the battle, the humans attempted to send out several distress beacons in hopes of strengthening their defences against our fleet; though all of them were intercepted before they could exit the planet's orbital defence grid."

Hara's mandibles then shifted into a thoughtful frown. "According to

our communication analysis officers, moments after the preparations for the cleansing ceremony were initiated, one of the human's stealth-equipped vessels received an encrypted message from their Intelligence High Command from the planet's surface. Shortly thereafter, it proceeded to enter slip-space out of the system...without alerting its allies to its intentions or its destination"

This caught the attention of both warriors, as Joram spoke up in surprise and confusion. "What of the surviving human vessels? Surely _they_ would have attempted to contact their allies for reinforcements to try to stop us from conquering another of their worlds!"

T'ekan was equally bemused. "Indeed; this planet must be of significance to them, considering the ferocity with which they fought to defend it. Many of their leaders joined their comrades on the battlefield in the past. Yet these humans simply abandon their comrades for the sake of their own survival. Have these cowards have no honor?"

Hara' turned his gaze to his friends in silent agreement. "I too was amazed to learn of this development. However, as our communication helmsmen has observed, these humans appeared to have no loyalty to anyone but themselves; they care not for what happens for their brethren, so long as they accomplish their quest for power and image."

"As such, it would stand to reason that we are not the only ones who are susceptible to betrayal."

At hearing this, T'ekan and Joram both growled in disgust and contempt; while they held ever growing respect for their adversary's military capabilities, there were still some humans that were indeed cowardly mongrels that deserved nothing less than dishonorable death.

"Shipmaster, the Unrelenting Defiance is broadcasting on an open channel. The Fleetmaster demands for us to respond."

All three turned their gaze upon the helmsmen who had just spoken, their eyes becoming hard with bitterness at the mention of said ship.

Hara'-Shareem was slow to answer, knowing very well what awaited him should he do so. Unfortunately, he was still a proud Shipmaster of the Covenant and as such, was honor bound to answer the Fleetmaster's call.

"Very well; activate an open channel with the fleet. Let us see what our 'precious' Fleetmaster has to say."

The helmsmen turned back to the control panel, activating the inter-fleet communication band. Like most of its kind, the CAS-class Assault Carrier was equipped with a joint inter comm. system that enabled the entire crew to view incoming and outgoing hologram messages via video screens and holo-projectors throughout the ship. However, it was doubtful that many were eager to witness what was about to appear before them.

Or, more specifically, _who_ was about to appear before them.

As the bridge holo-projector was activated, the three Sangheili beheld the holographic image of the bridge of the _Unrelenting Defiance_.

Both T'ekan and Hara'-Shareem focused on the figure that had just entered the holo-display before them:

The Prophet of Chaos, one of the holy priests of the Covenant. Ever since the birth of the Covenant, they were the speakers and holy servants to their gods. They were the ones who had deemed the humans as little more than vermin " a plague to the holy existence of the Covenant.

However, it was not he that had attained Joram's attention.

It was the figure standing at the ship's control-firing pad that Joram focused upon.

Allrem Za'omes: Shipmaster of the _Unrelenting Defiance_, and Fleetmaster of the _Fleet of Eternal Holiness_.

It was he who had willingly sentenced his brothers to perish that day. It was he who was responsible for the tragedy that had massacred his own fellow warriors; all for the sake of eliminating a few, demoralized humans, and for his own desires for pride and glory.

Joram trembled with anger, his hand inching closer to the hilt of the Energy Sword resting on his thigh. If not for T'ekan's advisement minutes before, he most surely would have erupted into an uncontrollable rampage. Nonetheless, he managed to keep his lust for revenge under control..._barely_.

Joram, T'ekan and Hara'-Shareem watched as the Prophet approached Allrem from behind, his hover throne halting just off the Fleetmaster's left shoulder.

"_Speak, my Prophet. And let your words of wisdom destroy all those who dare to stand before the Covenant. Let us cleanse these vermin from our path to the Great Journey."_

It was now that the Prophet raised his hand from his pedestal's armrest and moved it just above Allrem's left shoulder, as if to bless him with the strength and wisdom of their Gods.

And then he spoke:

"_Faith, my loyal servant; destroy them with Faith"._

And Allrem placed his palm upon the control panel, activating the plasma energy projectile at the bow of the ship. The plasma beam cut into the planet's surface, burning everything within the proximity of the blast.

Joram, T'ekan and Hara'-Shareem looked on as the plasma beam slowly carved the holy glyph of faith across the planet below. Wherever the plasma moved, it wiped out every living thing that was caught in its wake. Usually, it was during this procedure of the ceremony that the

crew of the Courage of Sangheilios would silently ask for the Gods' praises to fall upon them as well.

However, having witnessed that very same weapon be turned upon himself and his brethren, Joram could not help but feel pity for the humans below " if there were any survivors at all "who would perish to such a quick, yet agonizing, demise.

Once the glyph was finally complete, the Fleetmaster knelt before the Prophet, waiting for him to declare whether his actions had indeed pleased the Gods.

Apparently, they had.

As the landscape surrounding the trenches left behind by the plasma began to cool, the Prophet rested his hand on Allrem's shoulder, signifying the Gods' praises.

With that, the remaining ships began to carry out the cleansing process across the rest of the planet, as a lesson to all those who would dare oppose the will and might of the Covenant.

Yet another world destroyed by order of the Prophets in their quest for the extinction of humanity.

A quest that, for Joram and his brethren, no longer held any prospect of honor " be it in victory or defeat.

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Finally, I've completed the second chapter to this fanfiction; I hope you readers enjoy it. Please R&R when you have the chance.

As well, some of you are still questioning the timeline for my fanfiction Star Wars: Infinity. As I explained to you earlier, I intend to explain the Star Wars-Halo introduction in my other stories...the first of which I'm writing right now. So please, don't give me heat for messing up the timeline, or how I had the UNSC recover so quickly. For the record, if you play Halo 4 Campaign and Spartan Ops, you'll see that Bungie had the UNSC push for immediate military mobilization with new ships and vehicles...many which are built with Forerunner technology.

Anyhow, hope you enjoy this chapter and I'll see you later.

End
file.